NCA
VOC FOR PGM/FN
BACKGROUNDER NO. 5-6083 AUGUST 14, 1978
DAVID LENT/ROME

NON-ITALIAN POPE?

ANNCR:

SPECULATION IS RIFE IN ROME THAT THE NEXT POPE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH MAY NOT BE AN ITALIAN. VOA'S ROME CORRESPONDENT DAVID LENT EXAMINES THE PROSPECTS.

VOICE:

CARDINAL BERNARDIN GANTIN OF BENIN THE NEXT POPE? OR JOHAN WILLEBRANDS OF THE NETHERLANDS OR EDUARDO PIRONIO OF ARGENTINA? POSSIBLE IF, PERHAPS, STILL NOT PROBABLE.

THERE ARE GOOD REASONS WHY SEASONED VATICAN-WATCHERS ARE BY NO MEANS EXCLUDING THE POSSIBLITY THAT AFTER FOUR HUNDRED FIFTY-SIX YEARS THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH MAY HAVE A NON-ITALIAN POPE. ONE REASON IS SHEER MATHEMATICS. FOLLOWING POPE PAUL'S DETERMINED INFUSING OF NEW BLOOD INTO THE SACRED COLLEGE OF CARDINALS, THE ITALIAN PRINCES OF THE CHURCH NOW REPRESENT ONLY A SMALL MINORITY -- ONLY TWENTY-SEVEN OF THE ONE HUNDRED THIRTEEN WHO WILL BE LOCKED INTO THE CONCLAVE ON AUGUST TWENTY-FIFTH. PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANT IS THE GROWING CONVICTION THAT THE FUTURE OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH LIES IN ITS ABILITY TO MINISTER TO THE NEEDS OF MAN NOT ONLY IN ITS HISTORICAL AREAS OF STRENGTH, EUROPE, BUT INCREASINGLY IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD.

A NUMBER OF POTENTIAL CANDIDATES HAVE SHOWN GREAT COMPASSION AND IMAGINATION IN DEALING WITH PROBLEMS OF POVERTY, TOTALITARIANISM AND THIRD-WORLD DEVELOPMENT. CARDINAL GANTIN OF BENIN IS SUCH A MAN. HE IS THE PRESIDENT OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR JUSTICE AND PEACE, THE VATICAN'S HUMAN RIGHTS AGENCY. HE WAS ARCHBISHOP OF COTONOU (PHONETIC), BUT RESIGNED SEVEN YEARS AGO IN A CONFLICT WITH THE COUNTRY'S LEFTIST GOVERNMENT. ANOTHER CANDIDATE BEING MENTIONED OFTEN HERE IS THE ARGENTINE

CARDINAL OF ITALIAN EXTRACTION, EDUARDO PIRONIO. HE MAY LOOK TO SOME LIKE AN IDEAL COMPROMISE CHOICE, INTIMATELY IDENTIFIED AS HE IS WITH BOTH ITALY AND THE THIRD WORLD.

THE ARCHBISHOP OF VIENNA, CARDINAL FRANZ KOENIG, IS ALSO WIDELY MENTIONED. HE IS IN CHARGE OF THE VATICAN'S SECRETARIAT FOR RELATIONS WITH NON-BELIEVERS. HE IS CONSIDERED AN EXPERT ON NON-CHRISTIAN FAITHS AND ON SPIRITUAL CURRENTS IN EASTERN EUROPE.

ANOTHER FREQUENTLY MENTIONED CANDIDATE IS CARDINAL JOHAN WILLEBRANDS OF THE NETHERLANS, AN ADVOCATE ON INTER-FAITH COLLABORATION AND A DOCTRINAL LIBERAL.

ELECTION OF A NON-ITALIAN POPE WOULD BREAK MODERN PRECEDENT BUT BY NO MEANS ANCIENT PRECEDENT. TWENTY PERCENT OF ALL POPES THROUGHOUT THE CHURCH'S LONG HISTORY HAVE BEEN FOREIGN. MOST FOREIGN POPES WERE FRENCH. IN THE FOURTEENTH CENTURY SEVEN OUT OF TEN WERE FRENCH. BUT THERE HAVE BEEN SYRIAN, GREEK, GERMAN, SPANISH AND AFRICAN POPES. THE VATICAN LISTS THREE PONTIFFS OF THE EARLY CHRISTIAN ERA AS AFRICAN.

AT THIS STAGE IT IS IMPORTANT TO REMEMBER THAT ALL MENTION OF PAPAL CANDIDATES IS NOTHING BUT SPECULATION BY OBSERVERS OF THE SELECTION PROCESS. THE CHOICE IS FOR THE SACRED COLLEGE OF CARDINALS TO MAKE BEHIND LOCKED DOORS, AND THEY SAY THEY WILL TURN TO GOD FOR COUNSEL ON THE RIGHT CHOICE.

-0-

GH/RD